

Spring 2017

## “Led by the nose”: An Examination of Mythic, Political, and Personal Transformations in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats

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### Recommended Citation

Green, Sophie Cornelia Gallant, ““Led by the nose”: An Examination of Mythic, Political, and Personal Transformations in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats” (2017). *Senior Projects Spring 2017*. 357.  
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“Led by the nose”: An Examination of Mythic, Political, and Personal Transformations  
in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
May 2017



## **Acknowledgements**

Thank you to my advisor Michael Staunton for your guidance and inspiration, and for the chats about Cork.

Thank you to Deirdre d'Albertis for your continuous guidance and for letting me into "Great Hatred, Little Room," which has informed and deepened my academic career enormously.

Thank you to Natalie Prizel for your help with sources, for talking through my ideas with me, and for all of the book recommendations.

To my family and friends, thank you for everything!



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## Introduction

### *Cathleen ni Houlihan* and “The Circus Animals’ Desertion”

When the play *Cathleen ni Houlihan* premiered at the Abbey Theater in Dublin in 1902, it was a crowning moment for William Butler Yeats. He had succeeded in developing a national theater for Ireland, a center of high culture, where he now presented a play inspired by traditional Irish folklore. It was a perfect marriage, a coming together of provincial Irish traditional stories, and Anglo-Irish literary craft, and the title character was played by Yeats’s muse and the great (albeit mainly unrequited) love of his life, Maud Gonne.<sup>1</sup> And yet the play was met with mixed reviews. While certain members of the elite took issue with the play’s thinly veiled nationalistic undertones (the play features a female personification of Ireland who calls young men to fight and die for her freedom) the lower class was largely unable to attend the play because of the theater’s lack of the customary discount seats, which created comparable uproar.<sup>2</sup>

The play centers around an Irish family in the countryside on the eve of the oldest son’s wedding. An old woman comes to the family’s house, asking that the men come with her to fight, and possibly die to regain her “four beautiful green fields” (Yeats 160),<sup>3</sup> which have been forcibly taken from her by strangers. Michael, the son who is to be married, goes with the old woman, seemingly enchanted by her words so that he forgets his soon-to-be bride. The parents later ask if anyone has seen their son, to which bystanders answer that they have seen Michael,

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the Abbey Theatre, the opening of *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, and the relationship between the play and Maud Gonne, see Adrian Frazier, “Cathleen ni houlihan, Yeats’s Dream, and the Double Life of Maud Gonne” (Sewanee Review, 2013) p.p. 225-233, web.

<sup>2</sup> This and the Irish political/cultural revolution are elaborated on in Tanya Dean, “Staging Hibernia: Female Allegories of Ireland in Cathleen Ni Houlihan and Dawn” (Theatre History Studies, 2014) p.p. 71-83, web.

<sup>3</sup> This and all Yeats poems referenced in the project are cited from the revised edition of Richard J. Finneran, ed., *The Yeats Reader: A Portable Compendium of Poetry, Drama, and Prose* (New York: Scribner Poetry, 2002).

but that he was accompanied by a young girl with “the walk of a queen” (Yeats 165). It becomes clear that this young woman and the former old woman are one and the same: the mysterious Cathleen ni Houlihan, a mythical embodiment of Ireland. In times of Irish oppression, this figure traverses the countryside in search of men who will fight for her, and who will perform the necessary blood sacrifice to ensure Irish freedom.<sup>4</sup>

In this way, transformation is at the heart of the play. Transformation here is to move between spaces: between the space of the human world and the space of the supernatural world and the accompanying change that one undergoes in this process. It can also be seen in a political context, where a singular political event changes a nation forever, such as revolution. And, transformation occurs on the human body. In *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, this appears as Cathleen’s physical body transforms from old to young. Cathleen seems to come from another world, and is thus transformed from supernatural to seemingly human. She then physically transforms from old woman to young, so that her body changes and she overturns the normal trajectory of aging. Similarly, the transformation of the nation is her quest: she seeks to transform the four provinces into a free and unified Ireland, under Irish rule. This theme of transformation is prevalent in Yeats’s work, within the poems and plays themselves, as well as in the arch of Yeats’s writing overtime.

Yeats himself outlines this in his later poem “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” (1989), in which he expresses frustration with his younger self and earlier work, while feeling that the former subjects of his poetry—his “circus animals”—have abandoned him. Yeats references his epic poem “The Wanderings of Oisín,” and then his later play, *The Countess Cathleen*, noting that his earlier work drew largely on Romantic poetry and Irish mythology, which he then set

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<sup>4</sup> For more on the figure of Cathleen ni Houlihan and blood sacrifice in Irish mythology see Rosalind Clark, *The Great Queens: Irish Goddesses from the Morrígan to Cathleen ní Houlihan* (Savage: Barnes and Noble Books, 1991).

aside for his theatrical endeavors with political undertones. In the third stanza, he seems to feel that his earlier writing did not go deep enough, and that he did not get to anything real with his writing about mythology. This reads:

And when the Fool and Blind Man stole the bread  
Cuchulain fought the ungovernable sea;  
Heart mysteries there, and yet when all is said  
It was the dream itself enchanted me:  
Character isolated by a deed  
To engross the present and dominate memory.  
Players and painted stage took all my love  
And not those things that they were emblems of (24-32).

Yeats perhaps feels that his younger self was too caught up in the mythologies that he was inspired by (and then the actors through which he presented his work), so that he ignored a deeper meaning. What is at the heart of the story of Cuchulain and the sea? What does the sea represent? Does the myth say something universal about being human that is not specific to this legend? Did the older Yeats writing “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” really feel that his earlier poems did not acknowledge these deeper meanings? He suggests in the above stanza that he was more interested in glory, in “character isolated by a deed.” He sought something greater than himself, that he later deems a fiction, or the trappings of something real. This suggests a transformation that Yeats has undergone in his writing as he has aged: his subjects feel tired and old, and he is critical of his earlier work.

The contrast between the first two lines of the poem and the final couplet are also reflective of some transformation. “I sought a theme and sought for it in vain, / I sought it daily for six weeks or so” (1-2), compared to, “I must lie down where all the ladders start / In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart” (38-40). Although the first two lines betray discontent and a sort of desperation reflected in the unsuccessful search for a theme, they are still hopeful. The speaker is active and in the process of searching, so that although it is ultimately in vain, there is movement and the possibility that inspiration will be found. The final lines however read as far more bitter and resolved. The speaker is now left alone, his old themes have been used and reused, so that he now has only the remnants that no one wants. His ladder is gone, which suggests that his ambition is gone, he has nothing to climb, and thus his movement is halted and he is forced to be stationary and to accept that there is no more inspiration to be found. The transformation reflected in this poem points to a central theme of Yeats’s writing. It is this theme of transformation that I am interested in in Yeats’s work, and that I will focus on and unpack in this project.

My approach is to look at poems that are specifically emblematic of transformation. I have identified three forms that appear often throughout Yeats’s oeuvre: mythical or supernatural transformations, political transformations, and personal transformations. Within these categories, I have paired poems that appear to have little in common, and have then proceeded to perform close readings to examine how these transformations function in the poetry. For example, I have placed poems from different periods and contexts together to look at how they are united thematically and through language. My close readings have raised a number of questions, for example: why does transformation appear so frequently in Yeats’s poetry? Does the way he writes—his language and imagery specifically—cater itself particularly well to this theme? In

terms of transformation, I wonder what the significance of writing about fairy lands and figures from mythology and folklore is. Perhaps poetical explorations of these stories can tell us something real about Yeats's human experience, or the experience of those he depicts. Looking at political transformations that arise in Yeats's work, what does it mean for a nation to transform politically? What do the political poems reflect about Yeats's own political transformation? Why are these poems so ambiguous, and is the theme of transformation a lens for expressing the ambiguity of political events? Yeats also writes about transformations of individuals, often in regards to their aging. How do age and the transformation of the human body, soul, and mind appear in Yeats's poetry? What is the relationship between these different aspects of the human being, and how does transformation function differently for each? What is the difference between depictions of male aging and female aging? These are a number of the questions that have informed my study, and that I have kept in mind over the course of my analysis.

In addition to close reading, I explore and attempt to answer these questions through conversation with other critical work. As Yeats is one of the most prominent poets of the 20th century, there is a vast amount of literature published about his life and work every year. I have thus worked with a few core texts that deal with Yeats generally, such as biographies by R.F. Foster and Richard Ellmann, and have looked at more specific work to inform each of my three chapters. In my first chapter, which looks at poems inspired by folklore and legend, I draw upon texts like William Gorski's *Yeats and Alchemy* which focuses on Yeats and occult, as well as on Yeats's own work with folklore in his *Fairy and Folk Tales of Ireland*. My second chapter, which contains political poetry, includes reference to Michael Wood's *Yeats and Violence* and Declan Kiberd's *Inventing Ireland*, to situate Yeats's work in a political context. I also use

chapters in *The Cambridge Companion to Yeats* and other work to examine how certain Yeats poems can be read as postcolonial, which I look at in regards to political transformation in the poems. Finally, in my third chapter on personal transformations, I use theory that is not generally associated with Yeats, such as feminist and film theory from Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" and Elizabeth Butler Cullingford's *Gender and History in Yeats's Love Poetry* to analyze the way that Yeats's poems about age look differently at men and women.

My intention and belief is that by looking at these poems through transformation, we can read them differently and gain new understanding of them. The lens of transformation forces a new perspective through which to read Yeats's work, which perhaps opens them to new interpretations while bringing us back to the poems themselves. For example, the poem "When You Are Old" initially reads as a love poem, where the speaker imagines the woman he loves in her old age. However, while it may indeed be a love poem, his narration of this moment firmly inserts the speaker into the scene, so that the poem may be more about his fantasies and projections than it is about the woman herself and her feelings for him. Likewise, "The Second Coming" is widely accepted to be about World War I because of its publication date (a year after the war ended) as well as its bleak and violent subject matter. But what else is the poem about? What are the more subtle meanings? When looking closely at the language and through the lens of transformation, is it possible that the poem can be read as hopeful? In the following project I will address these questions, and explore other questions and readings that arise from Yeats's monumental canon.

## Chapter 1

### Mythic Transformations: Transcending the Human World

In his poetry, W.B. Yeats writes extensively about fairies and Celtic mythology.<sup>5</sup> He was an expert on traditional legends, and recorded folklore in his collection *Fairy and Folk Tales of Ireland*, and also drew on mythic imagery in his writing for the Abbey Theatre.<sup>6</sup> Much of Yeats's work with Irish legend was written to promote an Irish literary revival,<sup>7</sup> and to advance Irish culture. However, his work is far from purely nationalist, and, as it powerfully represents Ireland, his writing touches upon a number of themes that speak to an inherently human experience. His poetry about the fairy world uses this other sphere to comment on what it means to be human, by using certain imagery to signify specific emotions. In the poems "The Stolen Child," "The Song of Wandering Aengus," "Who Goes with Fergus," "The Hosting of the Sidhe," and "Leda and the Swan," I will examine the way that Yeats's descriptions of the fairy world are indicated by sexual and natural imagery and how mythology is used to explore human sexuality and dissatisfaction with one's humanity. I will also look at the human fear of death and desire for everlasting youth, as depicted in the relationships between the characters in the poems and the fairy world, and the way that the fairy world is used to portray human suffering and a coming to terms with being human.

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<sup>5</sup> For Yeats's own collected folklore see W.B. Yeats, *Fairy & Folk Tales of Ireland* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1983) and W.B. Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory, eds., *A Treasury of Irish Myth, Legend, and Folklore* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1986). For critical reading on Yeats and Folklore see Mary Helen Thuente, *W.B. Yeats and Irish Folklore* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan Ltd., 1980).

<sup>6</sup> For further reading on the Abbey Theater see Cara B. McClintock's chapter "'It will be very difficult to find a definition': Yeats, Language, and the Early Abbey Theatre" in Deborah Fleming, editor, *W.B. Yeats and Postcolonialism* (West Cornwall: Locust Hill Press, 2001) p. 205.

<sup>7</sup> For an in depth history and analysis of this as regards especially to prose, see Philip O'Leary, *The Prose Literature of the Gaelic Revival, 1881-1921* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994).

**“The Stolen Child”: natural imagery, the fairy folk, and changelings**

Yeats’s early poetry, namely those works that are interested in fairies and the mythological sphere, are characterized by a heavy use of natural imagery. In “The Stolen Child,” the natural world and the fairy world appear to be almost one, in the way that the fairies appear in the first and second stanza:<sup>8</sup>

Where dips the rocky highland  
Of Sleuth Wood in the lake,  
There lies a leafy island  
Where flapping herons wake  
The drowsy water-rats;  
There we’ve hid our faery vats,  
Full of berries  
And reddest stolen cherries (1-8).

The fairy narrators reveal where they have hidden their treasure, in a real geographical location in Ireland, but one that is on the outskirts of civilization, and deep within the natural world.

There is a description of an interaction between two water animals, who one would expect to find by a lake, and the ordinariness of the scene protects the uncanniness of the fairy workings from unwanted detection. It is curious that these “faery vats” hold simply *berries and cherries*—not magical or enchanted berries and cherries—ordinary fruit found in nature that is presumably

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<sup>8</sup> For further reading on “The Stolen Child” see Kevin J. H. Dettmar, ““Evil Gathers Head”: Yeats’ Poetics of Evil.” *College Literature*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (1986): p.p. 71-87.

accessible to humans. Perhaps these natural berries further conceal the fairy presence, or maybe there is some fairy fascination with naturalness, and to these supernatural figures, the berries are in fact treasure. This blending of the natural world and the fairy world appears again in the second stanza,

Where the wave of moonlight glosses  
 The dim grey sands with light,  
 Far off by furthest Rosses  
 We foot it all the night,  
 Weaving olden dances,  
 Mingling hands and mingling glances (14-19).

The opening lines of this stanza create an upturned context, where although there are waves that touch the sand, the waves are of moonlight, so the touching is purely visual. It is still nature imagery, but the language plays with the wave image, a suggestion that something supernatural may occur in this very natural place. This implies that fairies exist within the human world in locations most distant from humans themselves.

Yeats himself confirms this as he expresses his own beliefs about the existence of fairies and where to find them, as quoted by Kathleen Heinige in her “‘Untiring Joys and Sorrows’: Yeats and the Sidhe.” Yeats writes:

I believe when I am in the mood that all nature is full of people whom we cannot see, and that some of these are ugly or grotesque, and some wicked or foolish, but very many beautiful beyond any one we have

ever seen, and that these are not far away when we are walking in pleasant and quiet places (Heininge 108).

Here Yeats stipulates that it is only in a certain state of mind that he is convinced of the existence of the fairies, but that in “pleasant and quiet places,” which suggests natural places in their quietness when read in the context of the poem’s natural imagery, he feels their presence. It is thus necessary to be out walking in areas that are undisturbed in order to experience the variety of fairy people who are otherwise concealed. Yeats further suggests that the fairy world is comparable to the human world in that some of its inhabitants are the sorts one would not wish to meet while alone in the woods, while others are relatively benign. While the fairy world is inherently supernatural and other in relation to the human world, Yeats here draws them closer together, suggesting that their populations share similar qualities.

“The Stolen Child” of course centers around a child, and probably a changeling, who is taken by the fairies to live in the fairy world. The child’s departure from the human world is hinted to be permanent, meaning that the young person never grows up in the human world, and never becomes an adult or grows old and dies. Yeats explains the concept of changelings in *Fairy and Folk Tales of Ireland*: “Sometimes the fairies fancy mortals, and carry them away into their own country, leaving instead some sickly fairy child, or a log of wood so bewitched that it seems it be a mortal pining away, and dying, and being buried” (Yeats 48). The fairies are interested in human children, whom they transport to the fairy world permanently. Because the creature they leave in its place dies and the human child does not return, the child is essentially

dead to the human world.<sup>9</sup> This suggests that the fairies are in a sense protecting the child from death, and saving him from the pain of human life, which also seems to be the implication in the refrain:

*Come away, O human child!*  
*To the waters and the wild*  
*With a faery, hand in hand,*  
*For the world's more full of weeping*  
*Than you can understand (9-13).*

Although the “waters and the wild” may sound ominous, the juxtaposition of the characterization of the human world as inherently full of suffering is much more frightening, because it is related in terms of human pain and manifests in weeping. This is both more alarming to a human child—who knows the human world and human pain on some level, but has no knowledge yet of the fairy world—and to Yeats’s readers, who are familiar with human mortality. The wilds of the fairy world may sound menacing, but they are later depicted as alive with magic, dancing, and hidden treasure, and thus just as thrilling as they are forbidding, and much more exciting than the ordinary events of human daily life. In this way, the child escapes the human inevitability of aging and death, and is able to become part of another world that is more exciting and less painful.

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<sup>9</sup> For an in depth discussion of changelings see the chapter “‘Come Away Thou Human Child’: Abductions, Change, and Changelings” in Carole G. Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples: Fairies and Victorian Consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) p. 59.

See also the true story of Bridget Cleary, a young woman whose husband claimed that she was taken by the fairies in 1895. Bourke outlines the story: “Then her badly burned body was discovered in a shallow grave, and eight members of her family—including her husband—were arrested and charged with her murder.” Angela Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999).

### “The Song of Wandering Aengus”: natural and sexual imagery

The use of nature imagery to indicate the fairy world, as well as the fairy world as an escape from aging and human suffering, similarly appears in “The Song of Wandering Aengus.”<sup>10</sup> Aengus goes to the woods because “a fire” is in his head. His disquiet is thus described as a natural element, but one that has a power over him, and is capable of destroying him if he does not extinguish it. He then seeks relief by going into the woods, where, away from civilization, he encounters a fairy woman.<sup>11</sup> The first stanza takes great care to set the scene for the supernatural meeting with further nature imagery:

And when white moths were on the wing,  
 And moth-like stars were flickering out,  
 I dropped the berry in a stream  
 And caught a little silver trout (5-8).

The first two lines suggest a relationship between the natural elements at play in the scene, as well as the speaker’s awareness of the natural world around him. Even tiny moths are noticed, and the stars are described in terms of them, which both elevates the insects to the status of stars, and makes the stars seem within reach, as though Aengus could just as easily pluck a star from the sky as swat a moth. In this way, the setting lends itself to the events of the poem, so that the meeting between Aengus and the fairy feels grounded in the scene. The trout that he catches,

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<sup>10</sup> For further reading on “The Song of Wandering Aengus” see Russell K. Alspach. “Two Songs of Yeats’s.” *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 61, No. 6 (Jun., 1946) p.p. 395-400.

<sup>11</sup> For the story of “Aonghus” see Peter Berresford Ellis, *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1992) p. 27.

“become[s] a glimmering girl (13), so that the point of contact with the fairy world comes out of an animal, a part of the natural imagery of the setting.

Nature continues to characterize the fairy world in the poem, as Aengus details his search for the girl and his dreams of their future with images of nature. In the final stanza, Aengus claims that he will find her, “Though I am old with wandering / Through hollow lands and hilly lands” (17-18). An implication here is that magical worlds can be entered from the human world in places that are most characterized by their natural elements. Aengus will not search for the magical girl in cities, or if he will, it is not their status as cities that will help him. He is interested in the structure of the land itself, in the inherent difference between mountains and valleys that connects them to the natural world. There is a comparison between natural and supernatural in the final image of the poem, which again highlights the essential quality of the natural world in passage between the human world and the fairy world. Aengus says that he will pluck “The silver apples of the moon / The golden apples of the sun” (23-24) in the ending lines. The silver and gold alters the apples, so that the image manipulates something ordinary to something fantastical, and both worlds are represented. The play between natural and supernatural is emblematic of the union between Aengus and the girl, where he is of the earthly world, and she is something other.

The use of apple imagery, as a specific element of nature imagery, is a traditional emblem of a human passing into the fairy world in mythology. Heinige quotes the anthropologist W.Y. Evans-Wentz on this tradition:

To enter the Otherworld before the appointed hour marked by death, a passport was often necessary, and this was usually a silver

branch of the sacred apple-tree bearing blossoms, or fruit, which the queen of the Land of the Ever-Living and Ever-Young gives to those mortals whom she wishes for as companions...(Heininge 109).

The apple tree is here referred to as an integral part of the transformation from human to fairy, making it is a sacred organism that is associated with entrance into the fairy world. The apples are also a gift from a fairy queen to a mortal, so the relationship between human and fairy is heralded with an object taken from nature. The apple is also here associated with life—beyond that it is something ostensibly alive and growing in nature—because it marks a human’s journey to the supernatural world as one in which the human is still alive, which Evans-Wentz suggests in the first line is very different from the journey that a person who has died would take.

Similarly to the effect of natural imagery, sexual imagery indicates the presence of the fairy world in the poetry. Yeats was deeply involved in alchemy and other activities that dealt with the occult,<sup>12</sup> which can be traced in “The Song of Wandering Aengus” to illuminate a sexual aspect of the poem, beyond the speaker’s obvious desire for the fairy woman. The aforementioned line about the golden apples of the sun and silver apples of the moon is reminiscent of the “mystical marriage” concept that appears in Yeats’s work. In his *Yeats and Alchemy*, William T. Gorski references this:

Another medieval motif that Yeats employed was the alchemical idea of the mystical marriage, or *hieros gamos*, symbolized as the

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<sup>12</sup> For information on Yeats’s involvement in the occult, particularly in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn see Brenda Maddox, *Yeats’s Ghosts: The Secret Life of W.B. Yeats* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1999). See also Rosalind Clark, *The Great Queens: Irish Goddesses from the Morrígan to Cathleen ní Houlihan* (Savage: Barnes and Noble Books, 1991) p. 165.

conjunction of sun and moon, the embrace of king and queen.

According to this motif, a union of the masculine and feminine was required for the attainment of opus...(Gorski 11).

Gorski emphasizes the correlation between sun and moon, and male and female that arises frequently in Yeats's work, and an inherent need for this heterosexual union in order to produce great artistic work. In this way, there is a sort of perfection in the coming together of these perceived opposites. The union of night and day as further representation of the sexual coming together of male and female is apparent in the poem in the symbolic exchange of the golden and silver apples. This is set in heightened contrast because it is part of a sexualized relationship between human and other.

This sexual relationship can also be used to examine the human desire to remain young forever, in the way that Aengus meets the fairy girl when he is young, and continues to long for her well into his old age. The girl is Aengus' connection to the fairy world, and it is apparent that his dreams of being with her center around them being together in her world, as depicted in the lines, "And pluck till time and times are done / The silver apples of the moon, / The golden apples of the sun" (22-24). In addition to the already examined otherworldly effect of the motif of gold and silver apples, the focus in the first of these lines on an action that is repeated until time itself has ceased to be further implies that the scene takes place in a world with a different set of rules than ours, in which a person may live forever. The way that Aengus cannot forget a brief encounter from his youth suggests that while Aengus is deeply nostalgic for the fairy that he glimpses and the life he could have had with her, he may be equally desirous of his own lost

youth. In the Irish myth about Aengus and his swan-love, Caer Ibormeith,<sup>13</sup> the two meet every night in Aengus' dreams for a year, and gradually fall in love, so Aengus' heartbreak over the loss of her feels genuine, and as though it is truly her who he loves and misses. However, Yeats's interpretation of the story does not feature a courtship over time, or even a conversation. The only word spoken between the two is the girl's utterance of the speaker's name as she fades from his view. Because the interaction is so minimal and yet elicits such a profound response from Aengus which is maintained into his old age, a possible reading is that his love for the fairy is more to do with his desire to enter another world and his longing for his lost youth—when interactions with the fairy world were possible—than genuine love for her.

The association of the fairy world with youth is referred to continuously in Yeats's writing about the fairies. Heininge writes of this:

Age is always important for both the Sidhe and for Yeats. According to tradition, those who are young and able are most eligible to be taken by the Sidhe; those who are old are of indifferent use. The fairies take people who might add to the beauty of their land: people who can dance and sing and sport, tend cattle, and provide mortal mother's milk for the children of the Sidhe (Heininge 110).

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<sup>13</sup> In addition to the myth referenced on page 6, for more on Caer Ibormeith see Sharon Paice MacLeod, *Celtic Myth and Religion* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2012) p. 52.

Heininge here looks into why the “sidhe,”<sup>14</sup> an Irish word for the fairies, are so drawn to human youth, and why they wish to possess it. She calls on a certain ableist<sup>15</sup> logic, the assumption that young and able bodied people are the only ones who can contribute to the fairy land, and that it is for this reason that the fairies most often take the young away with them. Heininge earlier quotes Yeats on an older female acquaintance of his, Bidy Hart, who believes in the fairies and loves them for their youth. “She loves them because they are always young, always making festival, always far off from the old age that is coming upon her and filling her bones with aches, and because, too, they are so like little children” (Heininge 107).<sup>16</sup> The old woman knows the stories, and knows that any chance of hers to be a part of the fairy world has passed as she has aged. And yet, although she does not have this ability, she loves the fairies and the very idea that they do not age because the stories and their seemingly impossible content remind her of her own childhood, and that magical happenings have been recounted by many, and may very well be true.

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<sup>14</sup> Find more on the many meanings of the term “sidhe” in James MacKillop, *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) p. 341.

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion on and definition of ableism and ageism—and the social construction of identities—see Christine Overall. “Old Age and Ageism, Impairment and Ableism: Exploring the Conceptual and Material Connections.” *NWSA Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Spring, 2006) p.p. 126-137. See also Rachel Adams, Benjamin Reiss, and David Serlin, *Keywords for Disability Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

<sup>16</sup> This image of a “biddy” discussing the workings of the fairies is reminiscent of the famous Bidy Early, an Irish healer and vernacular folklorist who told traditional stories throughout her life in County Clare, Ireland (c. 1798-1874). For more on Bidy Early and the process of Irish folklore collection see Richard Jenkins. “The Transformations of Bidy Early: From Local Reports of Magical Healing to Globalised New Age Fantasies.” *Folklore*, Vol. 118, No. 2 (August, 2007) p.p. 162-182.

### **“The Hosting of the Sidhe” and “Who Goes with Fergus”: sexual imagery**

The association of other worlds with youth and with sexual imagery is particularly noticeable in the poem “The Hosting of the Sidhe,”<sup>17</sup> where the supernatural world that Oisín enters is the land of youth. Yeats introduces this in his collection of folklore, “There is a country called Tír-na-n-Og,<sup>18</sup> which means the Country of the Young, for age and death have not found it...” (Yeats 179). In this poem, the mythical figure Oisín is transported to another world that is characterized by and named for its association with youth. There, he is unknowingly made young for hundreds of years, and only grows old and dies when he returns to the human world.

Although the return and instant transformation from young man to old might be considered a return to reality from a fantasy world, “The Hosting of the Sidhe” suggests another reading with the line: “*Away, come away: / Empty your heart of its mortal dream*” (4-5). With this, the fairy Niamh calls Oisín away to her world, and suggests that his mortal world is in fact the imaginary sphere, or as she labels it, a “dream.” This implies that the other world, the one that is apart from the human sector, is reality, while the mortal world is something from which we must wake up. Perhaps through this, there is a further implication of the association of youth with truth.

“The Hosting of the Sidhe” is also heavy with sexual imagery between a human figure and a fairy figure. These elements appear firstly in that the poem depicts the romantic relationship between Niamh and Oisín. Yeats describes this in his collection of Irish folklore and mythology, “The bard, Oisín, who wandered away on a white horse, moving on the surface of the foam with his fairy Niamh...” (Yeats 179). Oisín is thus drawn from one world to the next by

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<sup>17</sup> For further reading on “The Hosting of the Sidhe” see Joan Dayan. “The Love Poems of ‘The Wind among the Reeds’: A Circle Drawn around the Absolute.” *Comparative Literature Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1, Highlights of the Northeast Student Conference (Mar., 1979) p.p. 79-87.

<sup>18</sup> For more on this story see “Oisín,” “Niam,” and “Tír na nÓg” in James MacKillop, *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) p.p. 306, 313, 359.

his love for a fairy. The sexual nature of the poem also appears slightly more subtly in the diction:

*The winds awaken, the leaves whirl round,  
Our cheeks are pale, our hair is unbound,  
Our breasts are heaving, our eyes are a gleam,  
Our arms are waving, our lips are apart (6-9).*

In this moment, the act of entering Tir-na-n-Og reads like a sexual act. The aspects of the human body—hair, breasts, eyes, arms, and lips—and the words used to describe their actions, namely unbound, heaving, a gleam, waving, and apart, when paired together cultivate an image of an intense physical experience that is shared. The disarray depicted in this scene is due to the characters' crossing between worlds, and the very sexual description of this movement ties the fairy world to the sexual encounters in the poetry.

The sexualized description of the transcendence from human world to fairy world appears again in “Who Goes with Fergus,” which draws upon the tale of what appears to be king-turned-poet who gives up his throne to travel the country with the druids.<sup>19</sup> Fergus is characterized as a mythical figure, and in conjunction with the concept of travel between worlds as associated with the natural world, the sexual elements of this poem appear both in Fergus' relationship with nature, and with the language in general.

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<sup>19</sup> It is difficult to determine which Fergus of Irish legend this is, for as MacKillop writes, it is a “name borne by dozens of figures from early Irish history, genealogy, mythology and legend [...] including kings warriors, poets, and saints.” However, it is likely Fergus mac Léti, the mythical king of Ulster who undergoes a magical journey throughout supernatural realms. James MacKillop, *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) p.p. 189, 190.

And no more turn aside and brood  
Upon love's bitter mystery;  
For Fergus rules the brazen cars,  
And rules the shadows of the wood,  
And the white breast of the dim sea  
And all dishevelled wandering stars (7-12).

In the context of the story, the way that Fergus gives up his crown for a life in the woods with his poetry is highly romanticized, and reads like Oisín's renunciation of the human sphere for a life with Niamh in Tír-na-n-Og. In this case, Fergus' relationship with nature is equivalent to Oisín's love for his fairy bride. The first two lines of the above stanza, about ceasing to be unhappy in love, followed by the remaining lines, suggest that Fergus has found a similar experience with nature as one might with a romantic partner, or that the emotion is analogous to being in love. The subsequent description of the sea's "white breast" personifies an aspect of nature in terms of a naked human body, signifying an almost sexual intimacy with nature. This arises again in later wording such as, "And pierce the deep wood's woven shade" (2). With language such as this, and in context of the story of Fergus, there is an image of a sexual relationship between Fergus and nature, making a sexual connection with Fergus' disavowal of civilization and his magical dealings with the druids in the woods.

### **“Leda and the Swan”: a supernatural rape**

A final sexual image in Yeats’s poetry that I will consider here is the rape scene depicted in “Leda and the Swan.”<sup>20</sup> The Greek myth that this poem takes inspiration from follows Zeus as he occupies the body of a swan, an animal and part of the natural world, in order to rape the mortal Leda.<sup>21</sup> While this poem employs sexual imagery and portrays a sexual encounter between a supernatural figure and a human woman, it is a rape scene where the god overpowers the human and inflicts his power over her.

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still  
 Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed  
 By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,  
 He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

How can those terrified vague fingers push  
 The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?  
 And how can body, laid in that white rush,  
 But feel the strange heart beating where it lies? (1-8).

This passage highlights the way that even an unwanted encounter with the mythological realm is characterized as sexual, in this situation as a sexual assault. Like the fairy girl’s moment of transformation from trout to woman in “The Song of Wandering Aengus” and the subsequent

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<sup>20</sup> I will engage further with “Leda and the Swan” in the next chapter, through a political lens.

<sup>21</sup> For more on the Greek myth of Leda see Timothy Gantz, *Early Greek Myth* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993) p. 320.

romantic feelings that Aengus has for her, this sexual act between god and mortal marks Leda's transcendence from existence in only the human realm to activity in the immortal sphere. The first stanza sets the scene as violent, with the swan's "sudden blow," and his position above Leda, who is shaken and weakened. His power over her is apparent in the way that he holds her by the neck, so that he can kill her easily if he wants to, and the word "helpless" to describe her.

The second stanza furthers the violent and oppressive image, and illustrates the inevitability of the swan's power over Leda, and how she must surrender to him. The way that the stanza is formatted in two questions suggests the reading that the encounter cannot be explained or made sense of. It is the violent rape of a god upon a woman, of the fairy or supernatural world upon the human, and cannot be justified. Although she is terrified and does not desire the swan, Leda cannot free herself of his "feathered glory," just as she is forced to feel his heart beat and to accept the horrifying situation that she has been placed in. In this way, the otherworld functions as a ruthless and overpowering force, which negatively impacts human life, completely unlike the desirable magical world and magical woman that Aengus is forever trying to return to.

### **"The Stolen Child": a darker reading**

The darker reading of the relationship between humans and the supernatural that arises in "Leda and the Swan" similarly surfaces in "The Stolen Child." Gorski disagrees with the reading of the child's departure to the fairy sphere in "The Stolen Child" as an exciting adventure and escape from death, and considers it an abduction. The fairy world is, in his opinion, a dangerous and overpowering force that inhibits human life in the poem. He calls attention to the final

stanza, which illustrates the child's normal, comfortable life, and the solace that he must leave behind.

Away with us he's going,  
 The solemn-eyed:  
 He'll hear no more the lowing  
 Of calves on the warm hillside  
 Or the kettle on the hob  
 Sing in peace into his breast,  
 Or see the brown mice bob  
 Round and round the oatmeal-chest (43-50).

The child is somber here, and the descriptions of that which is comfortable and familiar to him are eerie when placed next to the scenes of fairy mischief, as it is conveyed that he will never see his home again. Gorski writes of this, "Although this refrain suggests that the human child is leaving a bad situation, his departure will deprive him of the simple comforts that ease the world of weeping" (Gorski 52). Although there is no denying the sorrow that accompanies being human, it is equally important to acknowledge the joy of ordinary daily life, as there are considerable pleasant aspects of the human world that make suffering bearable.

Gorski goes on to claim that in this poem, the presence of the fairy world is in fact dangerous and negative. "By representing the passage into the spiritual dimension as an act of kidnapping, Yeats highlights the inimical and hazardous aspects of the human relation to the superhuman. In effect, the higher world poses a threat to the lower world: it can overcome and override human life. Its power is fatal" (Gorski 52). While in "The Stolen Child," and other

Yeats poems as well, the other world may be seen as a positive escape to a place that is alive with imagination and beautiful imagery, it may also very clearly be interpreted as a force that inhibits the natural order of human existence. In this case, the changeling and Oisín are being captured, instead of being taken on a consensual portal journey.<sup>22</sup>

Heinige agrees that the fairy world functions mainly as a negative force, even as she acknowledges the many beautiful elements of that space:

This is the crux of the paradox for Yeats: the world of the Sidhe represents happiness and perfection, but it is a form of happiness and perfection which we do not choose, and into which we may be abducted without a say. The fairies kidnap us into their world, and do their best to keep us there by the allure of their beauty (Heinige 104).

Heinige interprets a duality in the representation of the fairy world, that it is both a beautiful adventure and an experience of absolute happiness, but that because the happiness is not always one that is chosen or consented to, it is harmful. Perhaps the child in “The Stolen Child” does enjoy himself in the fairy world, and likes dancing all night and having fairy treasure, however, this might suggest a sort of unhealthy Stockholm syndrome, in which the human has affection for their abductor.

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<sup>22</sup> Declan Kiberd writes of the poem : “ ‘The Stolen Child’ is not so much a plea for escape as an account of the claims of the real world and of the costs of any dream. The agony and strife of human hearts in a world full of weeping are cited as legitimate reasons for leaving the landscape of reality, but the child, being ‘human,’ cannot but feel the tug of that world. A tension is set up between fairyland and the warm humanity of the country kitchen, which the child must abandon in forsaking the weeping of the world. In avoiding those tears, the child may also lose the capacity to feel: innocence will indeed be blank inexperience.” Kiberd thus draws a parallel between the human world and emotion. If the child leaves the human world for the fairy world, he will stop being able to feel, which Kiberd characterizes as “blank.” Going with the fairies is thus an avoidance of necessary and important human feeling. Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) p. 112.

The supernatural world and the transformations that occur within and to it thus function as a way of examining the natural world, that here being the human world. From the uplifted and exuberant fairy dances of “The Stolen Child,” to the sensual adventure of “The Hosting of the Sidhe,” to finally the oppressive and terrifying violation of “Leda and the Swan,” the fairy world symbolizes a range of human experiences. And transformation is at the heart of this. What would it feel like to transcend mortality and be elevated to supernatural status? Would we take the opportunity of changing into something else, or of trading in human comforts and human emotions for endless youth? Does the act of writing poetry about these transformations in a way actualize them? Yeats’s poetry about fairies and mythology, far from being escapist,<sup>23</sup> inspires these questions about the supernatural world, but also forces one to look inwards and to think about what aspects of ordinary life evoke something fantastical. Furthermore, these works suggest that human suffering is unavoidable, and that it is a necessary part of being human that shapes our existence.

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<sup>23</sup> Here meaning literature that seeks to take the reader out of their reality with fantastical imagery.

## Chapter 2

### Political Transformations: Political Destruction as Birth

Yeats's political poetry often draws a parallel between moments of political transformation and birth, most notably in "The Second Coming" (1919) and "Easter, 1916" (1916). The political changes, from the more obvious palpable shifting of countries after war, to the transformation of ordinary people to legends after their death, can be compared to births in the way that these moments of traumatic transformation can be isolated from their effects. By this, I mean that the aftermath of violent rebellion or war is not depicted as traumatic, but instead as ambiguous and hopeful. Out of political destruction is born new beginnings, so that even the most visceral scenes of violence appear to have some positive or at least hopeful outcome. This can be further understood when accompanied by a reading of "Leda and the Swan" (1924), which holds both violent sexual and political imagery, and thus ties together motifs of the body and the nation. In the following chapter I will look at political transformations in "The Second Coming," "Leda and the Swan," and "Easter, 1916" to examine the way that transformation in Yeats's poetry is largely destructive, and constructive change can only come from the elimination of what was before.

"The Second Coming" uses apocalyptic language that points to the breakdown of a society, but suggests that this breakdown will lead to rebuilding, and that in fact, destruction is necessary for a stronger or more active society. "Leda and the Swan" draws upon the Greek myth of the rape of Leda, which results in the birth of Helen, and the consequent destruction of Troy and building of Rome. The poem has been theorized to be an allegory of English

colonialism of Ireland, with Zeus or the swan as England, and Leda as Ireland.<sup>24</sup> Both of these readings reveal violent political transformations that make room for arguably positive reconstruction, or some gain from horrific circumstances. In “Easter, 1916,” the chaotic transformations are first the obvious destruction of physical and economic aspects of Dublin which occurred during the Irish rebellion of 1916, secondly the transformation of the rebels from ordinary people to martyrs and Irish historical figures, and finally the change in the speaker’s opinion of these people. Through each of these transformations, it is apparent that for Yeats, political transformations must be destructive and violent in order to yield positive rebuilding and change. In examining these moments of political destruction, it is useful to look at political change in Yeats’s poetry as akin to birth, to explore the way that moments of trauma can be isolated from their sometimes-positive effects.

### “The Second Coming”

The poem “The Second Coming” has an immediately oppressive tone, with apocalyptic imagery that suggests the inevitable oncoming end of the world.<sup>25</sup> And yet, most of this imagery is characterized by uncertainty, so that the chaos of the poem is terrifying because it is unclear what the apocalyptic event or its aftermath will be. “The Second Coming” outlines some transformation of the world that is heralded by complete destruction, and although the imagery that describes this is ominous, it is suggested that the outcome will be positive. The first three

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<sup>24</sup> In “Yeats’s ‘Leda and the Swan’: A Myth of Violence,” Ruzbeh Babae and Wan Roselezam Wan Yahya introduce the piece: “The poem is based on the story of Leda, who was raped by Zeus in the form of a swan and later gave birth to Helen of Troy. In Yeats’s poem, Leda represents Ireland, forcefully violated by a foreign power—Great Britain.” Ruzbeh Babae, Wan Roselezam, “Yeats’s ‘Leda and the Swan’: A Myth of Violence” (Malaysia: International Letters of Social and Humanistic Science, 2014) p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> The biblical second coming, which the poem’s title alludes to, is found in “The New Testament,” repeatedly, but specifically in Revelation 20:11-15, Matthew 24:42-44, John 5:28-29. *The Holy Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

lines point to this, as Yeats introduces the upturned natural order of the world: “Turning and turning in the widening gyre / The falcon cannot hear the falconer; / Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold” (1-3). Here Yeats sets up the unwieldy nature of the poem with recurrence of the word “turning,” illustrating that the falcon is in motion and lost in some form of vortex, because it cannot hear the call of the falconer below. The subsequent line implies that this is unusual and is thus reflective of the way that society is breaking down. However, the incident that Yeats chooses to illustrate this breakdown suggests that the disintegration may have positive aftermath. Falconry, although it is a form of hunting, should be understood in this context as a sport enjoyed by the upper class.<sup>26</sup> The falcon’s inability to hear the falconer thus does not inhibit the falconer from eating, but from engaging in a game that is on some level and symbol of power. Likewise, the falcon is a bird of prey that can exist on its own without direction from the falconer, and is in captivity only for the falconer’s enjoyment. In this way, the breakdown of communication between the two figures connotes the end of an afternoon of sport for the falconer, but freedom and return to the wild—its natural habitat—for the falcon.

Similarly, Yeats writes, “The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned” (5-6). The celebration of innocence is thus immersed in a sea of blood, implying that innocence is no longer celebrated or commemorated. Perhaps the way that innocence is here not to be marked with ceremony suggests that it is no longer present in the world of the poem. Whatever event is about to transpire, everyone is implicated, everyone is guilty. The tide, however, marks change in the cyclical way that it forever comes in and goes out. The blood in the tide will therefore be washed out, leaving fresh water. The use of the tide imagery thus suggests some renewing quality, so that although the image of blood in the water and innocence being drowned connotes violence, there is an implication that this will prompt

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<sup>26</sup> *Random House Unabridged Dictionary* (New York: Random House, 1993) p. 694.

change. In his *Yeats and Violence*, Michael Wood comments on the sometimes-revitalizing nature of violence in Yeats's poetry. He states:

In 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen' and other poems of that period (1919-1922) Yeats both dramatizes frightful violence and suggests that violence may alter the world. It could wreck ideals certainly, but just as possibly might open the door to a new order. The wreckage was real for him, and the apocalypse was always just around the corner. Or when it came it turned out not to be the apocalypse" (Wood 15).

Wood here looks specifically at "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen, but extends his observation to other poems like "The Second Coming" which similarly focus on violence and destruction, but suggest that this may be opportunity for rebuilding. Wood here notes that Yeats is aware of violence around him, writing that the "wreckage was real for him," but implies that Yeats could be extreme in his writing, always anticipating an apocalypse that never came. In the case of "The Second Coming," Yeats does herald the apocalypse with his descriptions of anarchy and chaos. The lines, "Surely some revelation is at hand; / Surely the Second Coming is at hand" (9-10), whether written ironically or in earnest, call on the speaker's belief that a great transformation is about to occur, akin to Jesus' return to earth and full assumption of power to judge the dead and the living.<sup>27</sup>

There is hopefulness suggested, however, by the final five lines of the poem, which, although filled with dark imagery, have a sanguine subtext. These read:

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<sup>27</sup> "Second Coming of Christ." *Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia*. Scholastic Grolier Online, [gme.grolier.com/article?assetid=0261530-0](http://gme.grolier.com/article?assetid=0261530-0). Accessed 12 Feb. 2017.

The darkness drops again; but now I know  
 That twenty centuries of stony sleep  
 Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,  
 And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
 Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born? (18-22).<sup>28</sup>

The passage further characterizes the poem as dark and apocalyptic with the initial lines, and then suggests hopefulness with the final line. The “darkness drops” connotes nightfall, the end of a day, or here the end of a longer period. It is not a peaceful night, however, as two lines down we have the phrase “vexed to nightmare.” The image of an unsettling termination is thus presented, as it is apparent that something is coming to a close, but that the process of this end will be nightmarish. Although it is unclear why exactly the apocalyptic event will be so frightening, Wood argues that it is because of the ambiguity of what will come next. He puts it: “The terror of the rough best in ‘The Second Coming’ lies both in the new order it will bring, the end of a cycle, and the almost certainly violent means it will use in the bringing” (Wood 209). The nature of the “rough beast” is unclear, so the transformation that it is a precursor of is terrifying in its obscurity. Wood writes that the beast will bring about world change with “almost certainly violent means,” but as the poem exists in a moment that is already violent, which we know from the blood marking the tide in the first stanza, perhaps the beast does not need to implement more, and its rebirth will be a time of similar rebuilding for the world. Or, the

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<sup>28</sup> In his chapter “The First Apocalypse (Daniel 7–12) A Story Told Backwards,” Christopher B. Hays describes Daniel’s vision of four beasts in Daniel 7:1-28, “Daniel seeks out one of the attendants (unlike in the previous chapters found in Dan 1–6, Daniel can no longer interpret dreams and visions—he needs an otherworldly mediator to interpret them for him). The attendant tells him that the beasts symbolize kingdoms...” Is Yeats drawing upon this vision with his beast at the end of “The Second Coming?” Does the beast then symbolize a new kingdom that will come into being? Does that make Yeats himself the “otherworldly mediator” who interprets the vision through poetry? Christopher B. Hays, *Apocalypses in Context* ( Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2016) p. 22.

violence is a necessary means to an end, so although frightening and destructive, it makes room for a new beginning.

The beast can be understood to *be* the political change that is at hand, and, I argue, an embodiment of the transformation.<sup>29</sup> The speaker does not know what the beast is, and its ambiguousness—if we assume that the beast is the same figure that is earlier described—is furthered by the beginning of the second stanza.

Surely some revelation is at hand;  
 Surely the Second Coming is at hand.  
 The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out  
 When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi  
 Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert  
 A shape with lion body and the head of a man,  
 A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,  
 Is moving its slow thighs while all about it  
 Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds (9-17).

The first two lines here pose a question. The speaker calls for a revelation, exclaiming that something must be about to change. The vision of the beast is then an answer: here is the change agent, a creature that is both strange and familiar, part animal and part human, that is pitiless and thus immune to human suffering. The beastly figure's arrival is likened to Christ's second coming to earth, giving it extreme agency and power to change, and to pass judgment on the

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<sup>29</sup> Kiberd suggests another stylistic reading of the beast, that it may also be “a divine agent of inspiration, heralding not only a new era but also new subjects for poetry.” Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) p. 312.

human race. The beast is similarly characterized as an interruption in the final line, as we see that it has wreaked havoc on the birds of the desert through which it slouches. Perhaps because of the power given to this creature, and the effect that it has its surroundings, the beast is in no hurry. Its thighs are “slow,” it is moving steadily towards its end goal, which is its rebirth.

At the end of “The Second Coming,” we see the moment of political transformation presented as a birth, with the final lines, “And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?” (21-22). The beast, or for our purposes, the political change, is taking its time to be born. From the phrase “its hour come round at last,” it is apparent that for the speaker, this moment of transformation has been long in coming. And yet, it moves slowly, “slouch[ing]” in fact, connoting a sort of laziness, towards Bethlehem and its birth. As we have examined, the poem already appears to be situated in a violent context. However, the notion that a birth is about to occur connotes that Woods is right, and another traumatic event is oncoming, both for the beast who is being born and thus passing from one space to another, and for whoever or whatever is giving birth to it. And yet, the connotation of birth is the resulting new life, so that out of these violent moments and probable destruction, something is created.

There is a comparable feeling that the nightmare of the third line, the result of a rocking cradle, may finally waken the sleeping child with a shock and be the impetus for action. This is suggested by the lines, “...but now I know / That twenty centuries of stony sleep / Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle.” The twenty centuries may be a biblical reference to the time between Jesus’ birth and when the poem is being written, or perhaps it is emblematic of a time of social inaction, a suggestion that humanity has been “asleep” and that “stony” refers to a lack of emotion or zeal that is necessary to make positive change.<sup>30</sup> The poem is largely dark, and

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<sup>30</sup> “Stony.” *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Oxford Living Dictionaries, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/stony>. Accessed 12 Feb. 2017.

describes a world in the midst of anarchy.<sup>31</sup> However, it is clear that this world is on the brink of change, and that the aftermath of painful anarchy may be some form of revival and rebuilding.<sup>32</sup>

### “Leda and the Swan”

When we examine transformations in “Leda and the Swan,” the language surrounding the rape is so violent and specific, it is obvious that it describes a rape, unlike the ambiguousness of “The Second Coming.” The moment of transformation in “Leda and the Swan” is a brutal interpretation of the Greek myth, where Leda is overpowered and impregnated with the child who will become the impetus for the Trojan War.<sup>33</sup> However, within the context of the myth, the destruction of Troy leads to the building of Rome, and the beginning of the Roman Empire, which scholarship on “Leda and the Swan” has linked to Irish rebellions and ultimate independence from England. In this way, the ruthless rape scene, which is unforgivable in its savage violation of Leda, is the catalyst for enormous rebuilding and strength with both the implication of the legacy of the Roman Empire, and Irish Independence and cultural revival. The image of destructive transformation is thus linked to rebuilding, presenting another moment in Yeats’s poetry that suggests that true transformation can only be reached through destruction.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Terrence Brown looks at Yeats’s thoughts on war and the political climate during his writing on “The Second Coming.” Terrence Brown, *The Life of W.B. Yeats* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999) p. 270.

<sup>32</sup> For a detailed discussion of “The Second Coming,” see Richard Ellmann, *The Identity of Yeats* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954) p. 258.

<sup>33</sup> For more on the myth and the union between Leda and Zeus in swan form see Timothy Gantz, *Early Greek Myth* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993) p. 320.

For another reading of the myth, and how it manifests very differently in the visual art world, see the brief description of a marble bust in the *Museum of Fine Arts Bulletin*, Vol. 5, No. 25 (Apr., 1907), p. 15.

<sup>34</sup> Elizabeth Cullingford notes that the metaphor of “Leda and the Swan” has also been identified as Yeats’s belief that “the reign of democracy [was] over for the present” (Cullingford 142). For further reading situating “Leda and the Swan” in the Irish political and moral scene of the 1920s see her chapter “Swans on the cesspool: Leda and

The first two stanzas of the poem are a detailed description of the encounter between the swan and Leda, which do not hint at political subtext, but are more focused on the moment of rape and the experience of aggressor and victim. The first stanza reads:

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still  
 Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed  
 By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,  
 He holds her helpless breast upon his breast (1-4).

There is an immediate power dynamic set up in the first two lines, with the swan's attack deemed "sudden," and thus unexpected. The swan takes Leda unawares, and then asserts his power over her, which is implied with the beating of his "great wings," in contrast to her "staggering." Although Leda is presumably taller and more mobile than the swan, his strength outweighs hers, so that he is able to take control from above and keep her down. It is then made clear that this is an act of violence or aggression with sexual intent, with the use of the word "caressed," so close to her thighs. Although we know that this is a nonconsensual attack, which is furthered by the way that the swan holds Leda's neck in his bill and continues to overpower her, the event is sexualized, so that there is a disturbing dichotomy between an intimate moment and an act of violence. This occurs again in the final line of the stanza, where the same word is used to indicate the body part of both swan and woman. It is not her breast held upon his plumage, or his breast against her chest, but "her helpless breast upon his breast," so that there is some parallel

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rape." Elizabeth Cullingford, *Gender and history in Yeats's love poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) p. 140.

between them, some sameness that suggests that this moment is mutual, even as this is prefaced by her helplessness.

“Leda and the Swan” is often read through a colonial, and then postcolonial lens, with the rape of Leda by Zeus as a metaphor for British rule over Ireland.<sup>35</sup> This can be seen in Marjorie Howes’ explanation of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. Howes outlines these interactions, “These historical processes involve hybridizing, fluid cultural exchanges among nations, and unequal, often brutal, power relationships among them as well” (Howes 207). This description of the relationship between colonizer and colonized is reminiscent of the swans assertion of power over Leda, and of accounts written about the relationship between England and Ireland. In one such work, the Irish Republican author and witness of the 1916 rising, James Stephens writes:

We are a little country and you, a huge country, have persistently beaten us. We are a poor country and you, the richest country in the world, have persistently robbed us. That is a historical fact, and whatever national or political necessities are opposed in reply, it is true that you have never given Ireland any reason to love you, and you cannot claim her affection without hypocrisy or stupidity (Stephens 22).

With this passage Stephens ends his journal account of the 1916 Easter Rising, or the “Insurrection,” as he refers to it. Up until this point, the account reads as mainly unbiased, and it

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<sup>35</sup> For one such reading see Kiberd, who posits about Leda, “The debate about her alleged consent recalls vividly those common clichés to the effect that the Irish were colonizable because they secretly wished others to take command of their lives. The poem might then be read as a study of the calamitous effects of the original rape of Ireland and of the equally precipitate British withdrawal.” Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) p. 315.

is unclear how Stephens feels about the rebellion or the rebels. Here, however, he becomes more blatant, and it his anger with England's continuous mistreatment of Ireland is palpable. The reasons Stephens cites for his outrage with England are easily transferable to interpretation of "Leda and the Swan," with Leda as representative of Ireland and the swan as England. Just as England "beats" Ireland, the swan overpowers Leda, and just as England "robs" Ireland, the swan takes something from Leda in his violation of her. The swan similarly claims Leda's affection by forcing her into a sexual relationship with him without her consent, and any grudging return of his advances by her is against her will. In this way the swan is further likened to England, who exhibits "stupidity" and "hypocrisy" in expecting affection from Ireland after its lengthy domination of the other nation.

Similarly, there are a number of parallels between Howes' explanation of postcolonialism and "Leda and the Swan," from the use of the word "hybridize," which generally refers to cross breeding between creatures of different species,<sup>36</sup> to the fluid exchanges, to finally the "brutal, power relationship[s]." While the sexual union between Zeus and Leda would always be a sort of hybridization because he is a god and she mortal, it is made more so by the swan shape that he takes in this story, and in the poem, where he is not mistakable for a human as he might have been in god form. Howes then suggests that there is something passing between the colonizer and colonized, so a cultural transaction occurs between them, although one culture has agency over the other and is in control of what cultural practices remain in the colonized nation, and what are forgotten. There a similar exchange between Leda and the swan, where although Leda represents the subjugated member of the "brutal, power relationship[s]" that Howes identifies,

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<sup>36</sup> "Hybridize": 1. Cross-breed (individuals of two different species or varieties). 1.1. (of an animal or plant) breed with an individual of another species or variety, from *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Oxford Living Dictionaries, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/stony>. Accessed 19 Feb. 2017.

For more on the modern cultural connotations of the term "hybridity," see also Peter Burke, *Cultural Hybridity* (Polity: Cambridge, 2009).

there is a suggested understanding between the two, and even the implication that Leda may be gaining something from this rape, or may not be completely against it.

This appears first in the second stanza:

How can those terrified vague fingers push  
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?  
And how can body, laid in that white rush,  
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies? (5-8)

There is an implicit contradiction in the first line, where Leda is terrified of the swan, but her fingers are “vague.” In this way, although her emotional state is one of fear, her body is unsure and her thighs are “loosen[ing],” so that it is implied that she cannot push the swan away because she on some level accepts and wants his advances. Her body is responding to him positively, even as her emotional reaction is horror. This is continued in the last line, where the rhetorical question signifies some excited communion between the two. The swan’s heart is “strange,” it is unfamiliar to Leda, and also the heart of a god and an animal at once, and yet she cannot help but “feel” it beating next to her. She is here united with the swan and shares an intimate moment with him, so that she perhaps understands him, and feels close to him. The final lines of the poem further imply Leda’s gain from the rape: “Did she put on his knowledge with his power / Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?” (13-14).<sup>37</sup> Although Leda is still obviously

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<sup>37</sup> Cristina J. Thaut writes in her chapter, “The Rough Beast”: A Postcolonial and Postmodern Yeats,” “The power / knowledge relationship between colonizer and colonized is a complicated one which questions whether the colonized takes on the knowledge and (for some) the power of the colonizer, thus forgetting their own history. Now that most of Ireland is free from the rape of England, having been dropped from an ‘indifferent beak,’ has it retained its own knowledge or has it taken on that of its oppressor?” Deborah Fleming, editor. *W.B. Yeats and Postcolonialism* (West Cornwall: Locust Hill Press, 2001) p. 18.

powerless at the end of the poem, as is evident from how little the swan is affected by what he has done to her, and the way he is able to drop her “indifferent[ly],” the question of whether she “put on his knowledge with his power” connotes that she has benefited from the rape, and that she is somehow the wiser from coming in such close contact with a god. Although she is the victim of an act of violent violation, and although some part of her has been destroyed, she has gained something and has been transformed.

This reading renders the poem even darker than it initially appears, as it implies that a rape victim has gained something from a violation of her body, and that rape may have positive outcomes. When reading this poem as an analogy for England’s colonial treatment of Ireland, an imperfect<sup>38</sup> likeness may be seen between this notion and the also controversial idea that the colonized nation benefits from being colonized. As Yeats himself said in his senate speech on divorce:<sup>39</sup>

We...are no petty people. We are one of the great stocks of Europe. We are the people of Burke; we are the people of Grattan; we are the people of Swift, the people of Emmet, the people of Parnell. We have created the most of the modern literature of this country. We have created the best of its political intelligence  
(Yeats, *Senate Speeches* 69).

Here Yeats calls upon great Irish protestant political and literary figures, and situates himself within their context, attributing the highest literature and political knowledge of the country to

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<sup>38</sup> I say imperfect because while the parallel may be drawn, there are many tangible examples of the arguable benefits of England’s colonization of Ireland, such as language and literature, whereas there are obviously none of these for rape.

<sup>39</sup> Yeats delivered this speech in defense of divorce, as Catholics had regained power in Ireland. This passage addresses the ascendancy class, of which Yeats was a part. Donald R. Pearce, *The Senate Speeches of W.B. Yeats* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1960) p. 99.

the Anglo-Irish, and thus the influence of England. Although Yeats was known for being pro-Irish independence, and had a great passion for traditional Irish folklore, he is here celebrating the consequences of English rule over Ireland, and advocating for the continuation of English protestant practices in Ireland. Because he is discussing divorce in this speech, Yeats may be correct to lobby for ascendancy influence, but the fact remains that he is speaking the language of the colonizer, and is elevating the effects of centuries of brutal subjugation. In this way Yeats again asserts that transformation is achievable only through destruction, as the violence inflicted upon the Irish by the English broke-down their cultural and language, and attempted to replace it with English cultural influence.<sup>40</sup>

### **“Easter, 1916”**

The poem “Easter, 1916” holds a number of references to transformation, from the revolutionary elements of the rebellion that prompted it, to the changed identities of the rebels, to finally the speaker of the poem’s own opinion of those involved in the rising.<sup>41</sup> The poem is centered around the Easter Rising of 1916, in which Irish Republican volunteers occupied Dublin’s general post office and several other major buildings in the city in an attempt to gain Irish independence from Britain.<sup>42</sup> Although this event is largely credited with doing just that

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<sup>40</sup> Kiberd goes into the role of the Anglo-Irish in Ireland, and the way that this comes into “Leda and the Swan.” He writes that Lady Gregory, “..fastened upon the saddest paradox of all: that the Anglo-Irish—or at least a good number of them—had actually begun to be *liked*, as well as respected, at just that moment when they were about to be extirpated. Out of such a painful discovery Yeats would create the final epiphany of ‘Leda and the Swan.’” Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) p. 92.

<sup>41</sup> For further reading on the Easter Rising, see Kiberd’s chapter “Uprising.” Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) p. 196.

<sup>42</sup> For a discussion about the motives of the rising and the tactics of the rebels, see Kiberd. Although the rebellion was violent, the leaders were mainly intellectuals who thought that rising up and releasing themselves from British rule would preserve more Irish blood by removing them from participation in the great war. Kiberd writes, “The 1916 leaders have often been accused of glorifying violence but, apart from one notorious speech by Pearse, they

(the Irish independent Free State dates the rising as its catalyst), it was a violent and destructive rebellion that at the time was condemned by the Dublin poor and English and Anglo-Irish aristocracy alike because of its immediate catastrophic effects on the city. James Stephens remembers an encounter with one of the younger rebels on the day of the rising, “I turned a few steps away, and glancing back saw that he was staring after me, but I know that he did not see me—he was looking at turmoil, and blood, and at figures that ran towards him and ran away—a world in motion and he was in the centre of it astonished” (Stephens 5). Here, as Stephens turns away from the bloodshed to go home to safety, he looks back at the young man as though involuntarily, recognizing that the rebel cannot walk away so easily. The other man stands, trance-like, in the middle of the chaos that he is a part of creating, and yet he is at a loss, as though he did not truly expect that his revolutionary endeavors had the potential hurt people.

In the passage above, the young man is transformed from being an ordinary person to a soldier, and then to the stuff of history, because of his involvement in the rising. Similarly, Yeats illustrates this change in his description of the leaders of the rebellion, whom he knew before the event, but thought very differently of after.<sup>43</sup> The beginning of the first stanza of “Easter, 1916” follows:

I have met them at close of day  
 Coming with vivid faces  
 From counter or desk among grey  
 Eighteenth-century houses.

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must have been the gentlest revolutionaries in modern history.” Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) p. 199.

<sup>43</sup> William M. Murphy takes a rather dubious view of the rebels, writing of this transformation: “English stupidity had transfigured ‘fools’ into martyrs and given an impetus to Irish separatism that was to bear fruit not long afterward.” William M. Murphy, *Family Secrets: William Butler Yeats and his Relatives* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995) p. 202.

I have passed with a nod of the head  
 Or polite meaningless words,  
 Or have lingered awhile and said  
 Polite meaningless words (1-8).

Here Yeats recalls the way he once interacted with the leaders of the rising on an everyday basis. Although he describes their faces as vivid, denoting some passion and spirit, he follows this with a nod at their working class professions, which are characterized as grey, and thus lacking in vibrancy. Before the rising, there was nothing unusual about these people, they were clerks or shopkeepers, and not particularly notable to an artist like Yeats. This is furthered by his repetition of the phrase “polite meaningless words,” where although Yeats is a poet, and thus particularly interested in words and their hidden meanings, these interactions are so banal, even he does not attribute meaning to them.<sup>44</sup>

At the end of the poem, however, these figures reappear in a completely different light, where they are named, and thus immortalized. While the beginning of the poem leaves them nameless, people at whom one would give a passing nod, this final attention to their names signals their transformation and their new found significance. After naming them, “MacDonagh and MacBride / And Connolly and Pearse,” Yeats states, “Now and in time to be, / Wherever green is worn, / Are changed, changed utterly: / A terrible beauty is born” (74-80). These men are, through their involvement in the rising and because of their execution, transformed from the ordinary people who Yeats met from time to time on the street to martyred legends. The line “Wherever green is worn” is most likely a reference to Ireland, or people of Irish heritage, so

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<sup>44</sup> For further reading on Yeats and language/poetic structure/style and why this is so notable, see Kiberd’s chapter “Revolt into Style--Yeatsian Poetics.” Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) p. 305.

Yeats declares that the leaders of the rising are forever changed in Irish history and culture, that they are forever memorialized. The change that the rising leaders undergo is similarly signified by a grouping of lines in the second stanza about an unnamed man, and the way that the unsympathetic image of him is never explicitly connected to his name. Yeats writes, “A drunken, vainglorious lout. / He had done most bitter wrong / To some who are near to my heart, Yet I number him in the song” (32-35). This anonymous man is likely John MacBride, who was married to Yeats’s muse and unrequited love of many years, Maude Gonne. Yeats grudgingly includes him in his account, noting MacBride’s shortcomings and their personal feud. However, he does not write his name next to this description, and indeed only names him at the end of the poem, with the other leaders. In this way, Yeats’s own personal feelings towards the ordinary man are placed at a distance from MacBride the revolutionary, for whom his feelings are ambiguous, suggesting that they are as two different people. Yeats’s rival has, by the end of the poem, been transformed into a martyred member of Irish history, and cannot be held accountable for past actions.

“Easter, 1916” is ambiguous throughout, so that it is unclear how Yeats views the rising, and if he is sympathetic to the volunteers. A line that is perhaps most emblematic of this is the refrain, “A terrible beauty is born.” The phrase is repeated three times, first prefaced with the line, “All changed, changed utterly:” (15), then, “Transformed utterly:” (39), and finally “Are changed, changed utterly:” (79). This line, and its repetition for greater emphasis, signifies that there is an inherent conflict within the transformation of Ireland, and of the rebels themselves, that something beautiful has been born, but that its beauty cannot be divorced from some terrible

quality of it.<sup>45</sup> John Allison writes in “Yeats and Politics,” “All of the leaders are commemorated precisely because they have become changed; yet paradoxically, it is that fundamental change that the poet questions. This idea of transformation is central, a miraculous release of energy, and a revelation of the Anti-Selves” (Allison 193). Allison notes that it is because of their transformation that the rebels have become so notable, and why Yeats is interested in them. And yet the transformation itself is under Yeats’s scrutiny. Is it a beautiful, hopeful thing that has happened--a positive change? Or have the rebels gone too far and changed themselves and Yeats’s world irrevocably, in a way that is destructive and without redemption? Can the transformation be characterized as one or the other, or is it too complex for such binaries?

The line “A terrible beauty is born” is also curious in the way that it presents the events of the poem as a birth. The rebellion itself was violent and chaotic, and was followed by more death, with the executions of the rebel leaders shortly after. And yet, Yeats suggests that something is born out of the violence. Although the nature of what is born is ambiguous, as are the speaker’s feelings about it, this use of “birth” denotes new life, something is created out of destruction that has a life and agency of its own. Perhaps then the traumatic events of the rebellion are to be understood as the experience of birth itself, of the labor, while what comes out of it is new life. This might manifest in Irish independence, or perhaps in the establishment of new Irish heroes and legends. Or maybe the result is the poem itself.<sup>46</sup>

The final stanza further leads to the ambiguousness of the poem. Yeats begins, “That is Heaven’s part, our part / To murmur name upon name, / As a mother names her child / When

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<sup>45</sup> Richard Rankin Russell takes this further, in his chapter “W.B. Yeats and Eavan Boland: Postcolonial Poets?” where he discusses the Anglo-Irish role in Ireland as pertains to this line of the poem. Deborah Fleming, editor. *W.B. Yeats and Postcolonialism* (West Cornwall: Locust Hill Press, 2001) p. 104.

<sup>46</sup> For more on the structure of the poem and Yeats’s possible status as either the “last Romantic” or the “first Modernist” and how this contributes to understandings of the poem, see Helen Vendler’s chapter “The Later Poetry.” Marjorie Howes and John Kelly, editors. *The Cambridge Companion to W.B. Yeats* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) p. 79.

sleep at last has come / On limbs that had run wild” (60-64). He claims that it is the task of both Heaven and the collective “us” to remember the rising and the leaders of it who were executed, implying that Yeats holds the rebels in high esteem, especially as he suggests that it is a Heavenly task to perform. And yet the next four lines can be read to characterize the leaders as wild children who have finally gone to sleep, with Yeats and those in his position as the mother figure. This feels contradictory, for the peaceful sleep of a rowdy child at night is desirable, while the previous lines suggest that for Yeats, the executions of the leaders was not. There is an odd play between night and death here, where the mother wants the child to sleep, and her words are a lullaby, while the witnesses of the rising want to breath new life into those executed in the form of their memory. Therefore, Yeats both celebrates and honors the fallen rebels, going so far as to say it is his “part” to keep their memory alive, while seeming to suggest that their death is like a crying child finally falling asleep for the night, and thus a relief. In this way, Yeats commends the volunteers for their actions and recognizes their contribution to Ireland, but is simultaneously subtly reassured by their death, so that the transformation of Ireland can be continued and rebuilt by people more like him.<sup>47</sup>

The three poems, “The Second Coming,” “Leda and the Swan,” and “Easter, 1916” each reveal Yeats’s belief, as presented in his poetry, that political transformations must be destructive to be truly transformative, or to make constructive change. The poems share an air of ambiguity: it is unclear what form the apocalypse—if it is an apocalypse—will take in “The Second Coming,” just as it is unclear what the effects of the rising will be in “Easter, 1916,” or how Yeats feels about the rebellion and the rebels. And “Leda and the Swan” is unclear throughout—

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<sup>47</sup> Kiberd identifies “Easter, 1916” as the poem that, “...brought [Yeats’s] waverings in the role of national bard to a crisis-point” in that it “...enacts the quarrel within his own mind between his public, textual duty (to name and praise the warrior dead) and his more personal urge (to question the wisdom of their sacrifice.” Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) p. 213.

is it a poem about a rape? About colonialism? What knowledge is put on, or not put on by Leda? Although it is an imperfect correlation, by thinking of the political destructions that these poems suggest as births, we get at the possibility of isolating moments of trauma or violence from their potentially creative or positive aftermaths. A birth is a physical experience, visceral and agonizing for the person giving birth, with an unpredictable result. There is a great deal one may not know about the outcome of the birth, from the child itself, to one's own physical and emotional condition, etc. But the production of new life forces forward motion. To give birth is to undergo a transformation, physical and emotional, that yields an uncertain but hopeful result.

### Chapter 3

#### Personal Transformations: The Aging Poet

Yeats's poetry about personal transformations are largely self-reflective: the old poet looks back upon his younger self, and remarks on what has changed. He stands by the water at Lady Gregory's home at Coole Park and observes the swans there, remembering how he looked at swans on this same lake nineteen years before, and although they look the same, he has changed completely.<sup>48</sup> Or, the poet visits a school and gazes at the school children, feeling his age and experience in contrast to their youthful curiosity.<sup>49</sup> In a number of these reflective poems, Yeats reveals his discomfort with aging, whether as a young man observing old men in "The Old Men Admiring Themselves by the Water" (1903), or as an old man himself in "Sailing to Byzantium" (1928). However, in Yeats's examination of old bodies in his poetry, it is notable that the old man in "Sailing to Byzantium" appears to transcend his body because of his eternal "Soul," while the old women in such poems as "Her Vision in the Wood" (1933), "When You Are Old" (1893), and "Broken Dreams" (1917) are described almost entirely in terms of their bodies and lost youth and beauty.

In her *Gender and History in Yeats's Love Poetry*, Elizabeth Butler Cullingford precedes her introduction with an abstract that includes the thesis: "Yeats's complex position in history and culture, his long obsession with a 'New Woman,' his unstable gender identity, and his constant remaking of traditional lyric forms, combine to differentiate his love poetry from that of

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<sup>48</sup> Reference to "The Wild Swans at Coole," for more on this poem and on Lady Augusta Gregory, Yeats's friend, benefactor, and co-collaborator, see R.F. Foster, *W. B. Yeats: A Life II: The Arch-Poet 1915-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) p. 81.

<sup>49</sup> Reference to "Among School Children," for further analysis on this poem see Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1978) p. 255.

misogynist practitioners of the genre” (Cullingford).<sup>50</sup> However, even with Yeats’s unusual position in history,<sup>51</sup> there are various examples throughout his poetry that are difficult to understand as feminist. These arise, for example, in his descriptions of the female body, both young and old, as he elevates the young female body and diminishes the old female body. Through close readings of three poems about aging women and three about aging men, in the following chapter I will explore how personal transformations can be traced in the poet’s descriptions of women, from the way he suppresses his own fear of aging by projecting it onto the aging<sup>52</sup> body of his female muse,<sup>53</sup> to his longing for his former youthful body, as he desires younger women.

**“The Old Men Admiring Themselves in the Water,” “Sailing to Byzantium,” and  
“Politics”: The old man’s body and the old man’s soul**

In the brief poem “The Old Men Admiring Themselves in the Water,” Yeats subtly reveals his discomfort with aging body through the young speaker’s observation of old men. The poem follows:

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<sup>50</sup> Cullingford, a feminist scholar, notes that this reading may be difficult for other feminist thinkers to accept, later disclaiming: “A critic who would do justice to the insights of feminism while engaging fully with Yeats’s poetry must entertain the recuperative as well as the suspicious critical impulses, and accept contradiction as inevitable.” Although it is right to be suspicious, Cullingford states that it is necessary to read Yeats as a potentially feminist poet, and to accept that he may be both feminist and misogynist at once, in order to thoroughly analyze his writing. Elizabeth Cullingford, *Gender and history in Yeats’s love poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) p. 10.

<sup>51</sup> Cullingford later suggests that he has an understanding of repression that is atypical for many male poets because of his Irishness and experiences living in colonized Ireland. Elizabeth Cullingford, *Gender and history in Yeats’s love poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) p. 10.

<sup>52</sup> Brown looks more in depth at Yeats and aging, see Terrence Brown, *The Life of W.B. Yeats* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999) p. 316.

<sup>53</sup> For more on Yeats and the muse see R.F. Foster, *W. B. Yeats: A Life II: The Arch-Poet 1915-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) p. 515.

I heard the old, old men say,  
'Everything alters,  
And one by one we drop away.'  
They had hands like claws, and their knees  
Were twisted like the old thorn-trees  
By the waters.  
'All that's beautiful drifts away  
Like the water' (quoted in Finneran 33).

While the title of the poem denotes that the old men themselves are comfortable with their bodies, and in fact “admire” them, there is a subtle suggestion in the language that the speaker of the poem feels differently. Initially, there is a clear distinction made between the speaker and the old men in the first line. The speaker hears the old men, but he is not one of them, and, compared to him, they are “old, old men,” with repetition emphasizing their age. Similarly, the lines that are in quotation marks, that represent the direct words of the old men, suggest that they have accepted that their bodies are aging and that they may soon die. There is imagery connoting nature, with the phrase “one by one we drop away” reminiscent of leaves falling from a tree in late autumn, or petals from a flower, and the final line suggesting that the old men themselves are like the water that moves past them. These peaceful nature images suggest that aging and death are natural, in that they mimic cycles found in nature. However, the lines that are not quoted, that are instead the speaker’s own observations, do not dwell on this peace, but focus instead on the old men’s bodies. The speaker uses the words “claws” and “twisted” to describe these bodies, so that while the description still uses the natural imagery of a tree, it is monstrous

and unappealing, in that it is wrung out of its initial shape. This further indicates that the presumably young (or at any rate, *younger*) speaker is uncomfortable in the presence of the old men, and that while they are focused on the cycles of life and death and acceptance of this, he cannot look away from their aging bodies.

This almost morbid preoccupation with the degenerating body appears again in “Sailing to Byzantium,”<sup>54</sup> in which it is implied that the speaker is old. The poem begins, “That is no country for old men” (1), foreshadowing that the space in which the poem takes place is not one that welcomes the old. In the second stanza, old men’s bodies are presented as inconsequential and useless. Yeats writes:

An aged man is but a paltry thing,  
 A tattered coat upon a stick, unless  
 Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing  
 For every tatter in its mortal dress (9-12).

In this first line, an old man is reduced to the status of an object, with the label “a paltry thing.” Not only is he an object, but a meager one without value, unlike the later “gold mosaic” (18), and other “form[s] as Grecian goldsmiths make” (27), which the speaker elevates because of their artistic merit. This is furthered by the next lines, in which the old man is characterized by his clothing—which hangs in rags upon him—and his body likened to a stick. The old male body is in this way diminished. However, the next two lines of the stanza suggest that the breakdown of the male body through age is not definitive because of how his soul operates.

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<sup>54</sup> For more on “Sailing to Byzantium” see Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: the Man and the Masks* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1978).

While he is on the brink of condemning his body because of its age, the speaker suddenly notes his soul, with the enjambment between “unless” and “Soul,” as though abruptly remembering that there is more to him than his physical form. The implication of the following lines is that the soul has agency outside of the physical boundaries of the body, so that the soul can, if powerful enough, make up for the incapacity of the body. This is suggested by the personification of the soul here, with the image of the soul clapping its hands and singing loud enough that it somehow makes up for “every tatter in its mortal dress.” Although it is unclear what exactly the “Soul” is, it appears to be some part of the old man that is eternal, that in fact has the ability to be “gather[ed]/Into the artifice of eternity” (23-24) unlike the body, which is described as a “dying animal” (22). The old man is thus still imbued with power through his soul, even as his body deteriorates.<sup>55</sup>

This reading is furthered by D.C. Fowler of the University of Washington in his rebuttal of an article by Simon O. Lesser in the *College English* journal in 1967. In this response, Fowler is mainly critical of Lesser’s reading in the way that it focuses on the body and sexuality, and, in Fowler’s opinion, ignores the spiritual element that Fowler believes to be paramount in the poem. Fowler writes:

Yeats is talking about soul sickness, and he is sick with something that is an analogue of fleshly desire, but not identical to it. The old man moves, like Job, from one sickness only to confront another. Shedding desire of the flesh, he finds in its place the soul's burning but

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<sup>55</sup> For further reading on the soul in “Sailing to Byzantium” see Harold Bloom, *Yeats* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970) 254, 344 and Richard Ellmann, *The Identity of Yeats* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954) p.p. 48, 59.

unquenched desire to know the meaning of its existence, and its destiny  
(Fowler 614).

Fowler is here responding to the line, “Consume my heart away; sick with desire” (21). He notes that desire here is comparable to sexual desire, but that it is spiritual instead of physical. Under this reading, while the speaker of “Sailing to Byzantium” uses bodily imagery and focuses on the aging male body, perhaps these descriptions of the physical are to be taken as symbolic. While the poet appears frustrated with the old body, he may in fact be using this imagery to explore frustration with his spiritual wrestling. In this way, the old male body is not in fact the focus of the poem, because it is transitory. The soul, which is eternal, has the more compelling objective of discovering the “meaning of its existence.” The poet thus does not truly examine or come to terms with his own aging body here, because the descriptions of the body are a vehicle through which to look at the soul, instead of looking at the body as it is.

Similarly, in the poem “Politics” (1938), the older speaker subtly comments on his age and his frustrations with his old body, which prevents him from approaching and being intimate with a young woman. The poem is as follows:

How can I, that girl standing there,  
My attention fix  
On Roman or on Russian  
Or on Spanish politics,  
Yet here’s a travelled man that knows  
What he talks about,  
And there’s a politician

That has both read and thought,  
 And maybe what they say is true  
 Of war and war's alarms,  
 But O that I were young again  
 And held her in my arms<sup>56</sup> (quoted in Finneran 151).

The poem begins with the poet, with the question of what he can or cannot do. However, it quickly moves to the girl, so that his musings are prompted by and surrounding her. In the next lines, it is clear that the poet is engaged in an intellectual and political conversation, with other men whom he respects because they are well traveled and well read, and are knowledgeable of the political climate. And yet, he cannot give the conversation his attention while he is aware of the young woman standing near him.

The poet does not interact with the girl, so he is not rejected by her, or told that he is too old to approach her, but it is clear that he feels he cannot “hold her in [his] arms” because of his age. In this way, although he is not examining his own old age or his frustrations with his old body, it is apparent that these are present in the longing for an unknown “girl,” who he feels he cannot possess because of their age difference. The last lines of the poem further imply that his desire is physical. He wants to hold the girl in his arms, and thus imagines a bodily union

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<sup>56</sup> The poem is published with the epigraph from Thomas Mann, ‘In our time the destiny of man presents its meanings in political terms,’ which Don Share notes in his brief piece for *Voltage Poetry*: “It’s a pretty heavy-duty epigraph, and the poem that follows is not what it would lead the reader to expect. Instead, the poem comes off almost as light verse.” Share goes on to say that as a young man, this poem—Yeats’s last published work—confused him because of its “lightness,” especially with the allusion to the Spanish Civil War, and the reality that the poem was published in the time leading up to World War II. However, Share notes the old observation that, “When Yeats was young, he wrote like an old man, and when he was old, he wrote like a young man,” and later Share’s own belief that: “During wartime, under duress, and in the worst imaginable times, we do make love; and we create not only poems, but families.” Don Share, “Don Share on W. B. Yeats’s ‘Politics.’” *Voltage Poetry*, February 26, 2013. Web.

between them. This, in contrast with what appears to be an otherwise stimulating intellectual discussion about current affairs, implies that he does not similarly long for his younger mind, but is instead focused on his young body and its abilities. His entire being is not dependent on his youth—he is still able to engage in intellectual conversation and has a network of like-minded men around him—he is not able to approach the attractive young woman, but his world is much broader than this, and he is not defined by his old age.

**“Her Vision in the Woods,” “When You Are Old,” and “Broken Dreams”: The old woman’s body**

The above distinction between men’s mind and body is overwhelmingly absent for the old women in much of Yeats’s poetry. Yeats’s old women are instead largely defined by their lack of youth and beauty, and their consequent undesirability. For example, “Her Vision in the Wood,” within the larger work “A Woman Young and Old,” presents an image of an old woman in the woods who reflects on past loves and her younger self. This woman is violent and grief-stricken, and appears to be inflicting some mutilation or harm upon herself, which, it is suggested, stems from her anger with her old body and her passionate yearnings for former lovers. The woman states, “Too old for a man's love I stood in rage / Imagining men” (3-4), and a few lines later, “I tore my body that its wine might cover / Whatever could recall the lip of lover” (7-8). The old woman is here in the midst of a self-described “rage,” because she is too old to be loved by a man, or perhaps by all men. Her rage is heightened by the way that she is “imagining men,” maybe the men that she once knew, or imaginary and nonexistent men who could love her now. The following lines in which the woman tears at her body imply that her rage is directed at her physicality, or that her old body is a manifestation of what she is so angry

about, a symbol of why she is alone and without love. She likewise wants the “wine” of her body, presumably her blood, to cover her and thus erase the memory of previous lovers and sexual intimacy. In this way, she wants to immerse herself, to drown in her own blood, and thus to forget both her happier youth and her current misery.

Hopeless and lonely older women appear again in the poems “When You Are Old” and “Broken Dreams,” where once beautiful young women, beloved by the male speaker, are now old and alone. When read in conjunction with Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” and Terri B. Joseph’s response poem “when you are old,” these works reveal Yeats’s objectification of his female subject and the way that his “male gaze” upon her forces her to stand as a symbol for his own fear of aging. “When You Are Old” denotes that, for Yeats, the woman in the poem will have less value when she has grown old and is no longer beautiful and appealing to men like him. He further suggests that she will feel this, and will long for her former youth and a time when he gave her his love. Yeats begins the poem with this first stanza:

When you are old and grey and full of sleep,  
 And nodding by the fire, take down this book.  
 And slowly read, and dream of the soft look  
 Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep (1-4).

Immediately, there is a suggestion that the woman’s physical appearance in her youth is important to the speaker, because of the use of the color to qualify her age. When he imagines her as an old woman she will be “grey,” which suggests dullness and lack of vibrancy. Her youthful coloring will be replaced by a greyness that he associates with being “full of sleep,” so

that she is continuously bereft of energy and is perhaps close to death. The following lines instruct the woman to read the book in which this particular poem will be printed, so that she can dream about her own young body. The speaker and his words are thus the instrument through which the woman views her younger self, so that the version of herself that she remembers is the one that he has created of her.

The second stanza follows:

How many loved your moments of glad grace,  
And loved your beauty with love false or true,  
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,  
And loved the sorrows of your changing face (5-8).

This “one man” is presumably the speaker himself, who claims to have loved the subject in a way that is notable and distinct from the love that other men felt for her. In this stanza, it is apparent that the poem is not really about the woman and her experience of aging, but about the speaker’s love for her, which he elevates above other men’s love because he feels that he loves not only her beauty, but her “pilgrim soul.” This phrase suggests a deeper part of her that seeks some greater fulfillment or meaning in her life. It is this part of her, as well as the “sorrows” of her “changing face,” that the speaker notes his affection for, therein implying that he knows a part of her that others do not, and loves this, and also loves her body even as it ages. However, if this “changing face” is interpreted to mean aging, it is notable that he precedes this with “sorrows.” He loves her even though she is getting older (or loves an aspect of her face, suggesting that this is physical love), but it is thus implied that her aging is unfortunate for him, a cause for sorrow.

The final stanza further indicates that the speaker believes his love to be of greater importance than other love, and that it in some way characterizes the woman's youth, and will be what she reminisces about when she is old. This last stanza reads:

And bending down beside the glowing bars,  
Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled  
And paced upon the mountains overhead  
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars (9-12).

The speaker thus implies that he expects the woman's old age to be without love, and that her loneliness will be the subject of her aged musings by the fire, which she will "murmur" about, "a little sadly." He then personifies love, making it "Love," an active figure who leaves the woman to wander the mountains and conceal himself from her in the stars. As the second stanza seems to suggest that the speaker holds his own love for the woman in higher regard than anyone else's feelings for her, one may speculate that this "Love" is either a figure born out of his deep ardor for the poem's subject, or that it is some elusive form of himself. Furthermore, if the speaker is so in love with the woman at the time of his writing of the poem, presumably when they are both young, then it is likely that his imagining of the loveless older woman stems from her young self's rejection of him.<sup>57</sup> Perhaps then, this poem is calling upon the young muse to accept the poet's love now, before she is old and it is too late.

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<sup>57</sup> The woman in the poem is most like inspired by Yeats's muse and unrequited love, Maud Gonne. For information on Yeats's rejected marriage proposals to Gonne, see R.F. Foster, *W. B. Yeats: A Life II: The Arch-Poet 1915-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) p.p. 54-58.

This reading appears to be the one also presented in Terri B. Joseph's response poem "when you are old," published in the feminist news journal *Off Our Backs*. The poem, which is addressed to Yeats, begins with roughly the same first two lines, but then deviates from the original with: "Of one beyond the reach of your desire / And how her eyes were reticent and deep" (3-4). In this poem, it is Yeats, or the speaker of Yeats's original poem, who is old and sitting by the fire. However, instead of thinking about his own younger self, Joseph instructs him to think of the subject of his poem, and how she is now "beyond the reach" of his desire, or perhaps always was. Joseph here notes that the speaker of Yeats's poem desires his subject, but that she does not return his feelings and is beyond his reach. She further suggests that the speaker does not understand the woman as well as he thinks that he does. Her eyes are "reticent," implying that although he thinks that he knows her better than her other lovers, that he knows her "pilgrim" soul, she is not sharing all of herself with him, so that in Joseph's imagining, the woman's eyes are in fact characterized by their secretiveness and the way that they conceal something.

Joseph's skepticism of Yeats's speaker and his love for the woman is again revealed in Joseph's second stanza. Similar to her first stanza, the first two lines are closely comparable to the original poem, while the second two lines stray just enough to denote a very different meaning. These two lines are, "Yet each believed as faithfully as you / He loved the sorrows of her changing face" (7-8). While Yeats claims that one man—himself—loves his muse most deeply, Joseph modifies this so that instead of men loving the woman in the poem, they *believe* that they love her, so that even though they believe this "faithfully," it is their belief, which is not dependent on their feelings being returned, or even really knowing the woman whom they

believe they love. While they think they love her, perhaps their love for her is more about themselves than it is about her and who she is.

This is even more plainly stated in the final stanza of Joseph's poem, which reads:

And think as you draw nearer to the fire  
Of how they tried to limit and control  
The resolution of that pilgrim soul  
They only knew in terms of their desire (9-12).

Although this stanza focuses on "they," being other men who loved Yeats's muse, it is implied that the speaker of Yeats's poem is included, and similarly attempts to control her. Just as Yeats's poem instructs the female subject to sit by the fire, Joseph tells Yeats's speaker to think by the fire. Similarly, Joseph tells the speaker to think about his young self, however, instead of thinking about his young body and the love that he was once given, she commands that he think about the way that he and other men tried to control the young woman. Joseph uses Yeats's phrase "pilgrim soul," but suggests that he does not have as great a knowledge of it as he thinks. Indeed, Joseph claims essentially that the great love that Yeats's speaker has for his subject stems more from desire—connoting sexual wanting—and less from a connection to or understanding of her soul, and that in this way, he is just like other men who sought her because of her physical beauty.

Similarly, the inclusion of Yeats's speaker with other men who loved this woman, who Yeats specifies that his speaker is set apart from, implies that he is part of a larger group that desires the poem's subject. He is no different from the other men who covet her without really knowing her, so that he likewise objectifies her and "limits and controls" her, and sees in her

what he wants to see. This control of the woman in the poem and his focus on what she will want when she is old and how she will look back on her own young body, which is no longer desirable, can be read as reflective of the poet's own fear of aging and the way his own body will be perceived. Because this is out of his control, just as the aging of his muse is, he seeks to control through language the woman in the poem, and perhaps control their future romantic relationship by manipulating her into accepting his love while she is young and he still wants it.

This way of controlling a woman through language by a male artist can be further understood through a reading of Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." This text outlines the concept of the "male gaze," a feminist term coined through Mulvey's work with film.<sup>58</sup> Mulvey writes:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness* (Mulvey 62).

Mulvey here suggests that in a patriarchal society, film, for example, operates as though the camera is the "male gaze." The act of looking is thus characterized as male, so that women in film are passive and being looked at by the active male, whose eyes the camera is a placeholder for. In this way, women in film are sexualized in their being "*looked-at-ness*" so that a female figure is

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<sup>58</sup> Further explorations of Yeats and feminism can be found in Terrence Brown, *The Life of W.B. Yeats* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999) 279, and more expansively in Elizabeth Cullingford, *Gender and history in Yeats's love poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

eroticized in a way that a male figure is not, because the camera is standing in for a heterosexual male.<sup>59</sup>

This idea of the “male gaze” can be traced throughout Yeats’s love poetry, in which he often observes women and comments on their physical appearances.<sup>60</sup> A further example is the poem “Broken Dreams,” which describes the poet’s memories of a woman whom he loved when she was young. The poem opens with the lines, “There is grey in your hair. / Young men no longer suddenly catch their breath / When you are passing” (1-3). Besides the way that the poem can already be read as the “male gaze” imposed upon a woman because the poet is male while the subject is female, these two beginning lines further indicate this. Similar to “When You Are Old,” the initial description of the woman in the poem’s<sup>61</sup> physical appearance is to do with her age, and her greyness, so we know that the poet or speaker is aware of her body first, when examining her. Secondly, the poet himself notices the “male gaze” upon her from other men, and how this changes as she ages. He notes that although young men were once so taken with her physical beauty that they had to stop to catch their breaths, this reaction is noticeably absent now, and she is able to pass without taking on Mulvey’s proposed “*looked-at-ness*.” However, the poet does not appear to be interested in how this change affects the woman; for example he does not consider

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<sup>59</sup> See also Janet Neigh. “Reading from the Drop: Poetics of Identification and Yeats’s ‘Leda and the Swan.’” *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (Summer, 2006) p.p. 145-160, which looks at Laura Mulvey and identification to analyze “Leda and the Swan.”

<sup>60</sup> In *Gender and History in Yeats’s Love Poetry*, Cullingford argues that certain poems like “Before the World Was Made” actually present the woman as the gazer, with help of the ballad style: “The ballad helps Yeats to reinfect the canon of Western male love poetry by presenting it from the woman’s point of view: inverting the master tropes of the genre he allows the object of the gaze to interrogate the gazer.” Elizabeth Cullingford, *Gender and history in Yeats’s love poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 205. For more on Yeats’s use of the ballad form see Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: the Man and the Masks* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1978) 279, and Terrence Brown, *The Life of W.B. Yeats* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999) p. 81.

<sup>61</sup> The women depicted in both poems are most likely the same woman: again, Yeats’s muse, Maud Gonne. For further reading on Gonne and Yeats’s obsessive feelings for her and poetry about her, see R.F. Foster, *W. B. Yeats: A Life II: The Arch-Poet 1915-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) and Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: the Man and the Masks* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1978).

whether the ability to walk without being sexualized by strange men is one that she is grateful for, despite the loss of her youthful beauty. Instead, he focuses more on his own memories and the reactions of the men who observe her.

This lack of attention paid to the woman's experience suggests that although she appears to be the subject of the poem, she is more a signifier of meaning for the male poet, which further aligns with Mulvey's theory. Mulvey writes:

Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning (Mulvey 58).

Mulvey notes that often in art made by male artists, featured women are silent, and are not cast as making meaning in their own right, but as symbols of meaning for the artist. When applied to "Broken Dreams," this is visible in the way that we do not hear the woman's voice,<sup>62</sup> and the way that all of the descriptions of her and her actions are detailed in terms of the men who surround her. This is apparent in the second stanza:

Your beauty can but leave among us

Vague memories, nothing but memories.

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<sup>62</sup> In *Men Writing the Feminine*, a collection of essays, Thais E. Morgan and other writers engage with the feminist theory that men who write women's voices, "always reaffirm their masculinity—their superior placement in the 'sex/gender system' or 'patriarchy'—when they write the feminine." If—as Morgan wonders—his is the case, can Yeats's omission of the woman's voice alternatively be read as feminist? Can his decision to not write the woman's voice be understood as a desire to not assume the woman's position and speak for her? Would Yeats's attempt to write his muse's voice similarly encroach upon her agency to make her own meaning? Thais E. Morgan, editor, *Men Writing the Feminine* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994) p. 3.

A young man when the old men are done talking  
 Will say to an old man, 'Tell me of that lady  
 The poet stubborn with his passion sang us  
 When age might well have chilled his blood' (14-19).

Here Yeats introduces the refrain, "Vague memories, nothing but memories," which repeats throughout the poem. Although he says that it is her beauty that is just a memory, there is a suggestion that without her beauty, the woman is no longer interesting to the speaker, so that for him, her beauty is representative of her as a whole. In this way, although the poet does not say that the woman has died, it is as though she is entirely a memory for him, even though only her youth has gone. The stanza continues to reveal that the woman is still being observed and discussed by men, and that her presence in the poem is about what meaning she signifies to the poet, and not about her as an individual. She has become a fireside tale, a story that an old man tells to his younger counterpart, as though she is not a living person who could tell her own story. Similarly, she is referred to in terms of the poet, as a "lady" that "the poet stubborn with his passion sang us / When age might well have chilled his blood." She is here a symbol of the poet's lost youth, a memory that keeps him passionate and seemingly youthful even though he is now old, just like the woman he is reciting about.<sup>63</sup>

It becomes further apparent that the woman is a symbol for the poet's own aging, and that her loss of youth and beauty matters to him because it aligns with his own aging. The third stanza repeats the refrain and then continues on:

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<sup>63</sup> For more on "woman as symbol" in Yeats's poetry, see Richard Ellmann, *The Identity of Yeats* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954) p. 74.

Vague memories, nothing but memories,  
 But in the grave all, all shall be renewed.  
 The certainty that I shall see that lady  
 Leaning or standing or walking  
 In the first loveliness of womanhood,  
 And with the fervour of my youthful eyes,  
 Has set me muttering like a fool (20-26).

In this stanza, Yeats expresses his belief that after death, he and his muse will be reunited, and he will once again see her as he first saw her when she was young and beautiful. It is notable here that he is looking forward to “seeing” her, and then lists the different movements that he hopes to see her body make again, so that her physical appearance is again what he is most interested in. However, perhaps more notably, he specifies that it is with “the fervour of [his] youthful eyes” that is eager to see the woman again. There is thus some correlation between her aging and his own, so that in order to appreciate her youth and beauty, he must also be young. This further suggests that his obsession with his female muse’s youth and beauty—both in “Broken Dreams” and in “When You Are Old”—is an indication of his preoccupation with the loss of his own youth. His examination of these women’s (or woman’s) bodies is a stand in for an examination of his own aging body, so that he asserts his “male gaze” upon them, instead of upon himself.

In the final stanza of the poem, Yeats reveals that the poem is the product of a day’s worth of nostalgia and writing. He finishes the poem with,

The last stroke of midnight dies.  
 All day in the one chair

From dream to dream and rhyme to rhyme I have ranged  
 In rambling talk with an image of air:  
 Vague memories, nothing but memories (37-41).

This final stanza is reminiscent of the first stanza of “When You Are Old,” with the image of an older person sitting and remembering former youth, which is enacted by reading or writing down these memories. It is implied that in this moment, the poet is old, because of the many references throughout the poem to memories, as well as the way that his memories are here pieces of “rambling talk.” The older poet is in this way cast as a *seanchai*, a traditional Irish storyteller, who spends all day sitting and spinning his tales. While the poem up until this stanza is largely focused on the woman and her age, the focus here switches explicitly to the poet himself, who has similarly grown old. This final acknowledgement that the poet has grown old just as his muse has, in light of the way that this moment does not look closely at the poet’s body or physical appearance, further indicates that the lengthy descriptions of the woman signify the poet’s aging as well as the woman’s.

In Yeats’s poetry—whether it be inspired by Irish legend, illustrative of specific or ambiguous political events, or depictive of personal experiences—it is apparent that male figures hold meaning in their own right. Perhaps this is made clear through the male speaker’s voice, or the actions of a mythical hero, or the different way that the male and female leaders of the Easter Rising are described. Women, however, are often reduced to bearers of meaning for men, instead of makers of their own meaning. Similarly, personal transformations in the poetry are largely connected to aging. However, while men appear able to transcend their aging bodies because of their souls or intellect, women are depicted as inseparable from their bodies, and are described in terms of their youth and beauty, or lack thereof. The depictions of the aging and old female body

thus stand in place of the poet's aging body, so that the poet's discomfort with growing old is projected onto the bodies of his female muses. Although it is possible to read aspects of Yeats's work as feminist, as Cullingford does, it is thus likewise necessary to understand him as a patriarchal male artist like those that Mulvey identifies, who reduces women to objects of the male gaze and symbols of his own experience.

## Conclusion

### The return of the circus animals

In “The Circus Animals’ Desertion,” Yeats looks back over the scope of his work, naming his many poetic triumphs, while simultaneously expressing his frustration with them and with his inability to produce further writing. The second stanza of the poem begins:

What can I but enumerate old themes,  
 First that sea-rider Oisín led by the nose  
 Through three enchanted islands, allegorical dreams,  
 Vain gaiety, vain battle, vain repose (9-12).

These lines draw attention to a central aspect of my project. Transformation is not a new theme. One could argue that it appears in practically every work of literature, and in many other mediums as well. I propose however, that transformation is particularly poignant and pervasive in Yeats’s writing. From his vivid images of change—for example, the metamorphosis of bodies through magic or age and the change in natural and political landscapes—to his language, which is rife with words that reflect transformation (such as the aforementioned “changed, changed utterly”), great shifts are omnipresent. Likewise, countless critics have of course written about Yeats. I believe, however, that through my readings of his work, I have come to something original that prompts new perspectives and understandings of the poems. The line, “What can I but enumerate old themes,” and the rest of “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” suggests that Yeats feels he has nothing more to offer, that any new writing he will produce will be stale and trite

and reminiscent of what he has done before. But the vehicle for this message is of course the poem itself, which is an incredible work of poetry in its language, imagery, and self-reflective quality. He thus contradicts himself, for although “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” is his penultimate published poem, and he therefore did in fact stop producing work after its publication, the poem itself is so masterful, it proves that he still has much to give to the world of poetry. Although my project is perhaps not as elegant or unique as Yeats’s swan song, I hope that I have touched upon something worthwhile, even as I “enumerate old themes.”

In examining a number of Yeats’s poems from various periods of his life and with very different subject matter, the central theme of transformation is inescapable. I have looked closely at this theme throughout this project, considering other worlds first, and how transformations between the human world and the supernatural world reveal universal elements of being human. I next looked at political poems and explored the way in which political transformations can be understood as births, in that the events can be isolated from their effects. I have also explored the seeming necessity for destruction and violence in order to rebuild. Finally, I have examined personal transformations, finding that these were generally self-reflective and interested in age, and that the process of aging is depicted differently for women and men.

I have found that Yeats’s interest in magic and the occult—although I may take issue with this on other platforms—does not manifest in escapist poetry. On the contrary, the poems that draw on myth and folklore speak to very real and human experiences, such as fear of aging and death, love and sexuality, childhood, and connection with nature. I have also found that for Yeats, constructive political change is contingent on destruction and violence, and that even in times of tumult, there is hope. Lastly, I have concluded that while it is possible to perform feminist readings of Yeats’s poetry, his treatment of his female subjects firmly characterizes him

as a primarily misogynist poet. This is apparent in the way that he forces his female subjects to act as bearers of meaning for him instead of agents of their own meaning, and in the value placed on women because of their youth and beauty, which male figures are not subjected to.

These conclusions have raised countless further questions, such as: can Yeats's work really articulate a universal human experience? Aging and death are, for example, universal. But these are experienced differently depending on a number of variables. It is thus necessary to question whether Yeats truly articulates a shared human experience, when his is so rooted in his time, and in his position as a white man and a member of the ruling class. Furthermore, in reconsidering my analysis on political poetry, what does it mean to say that Yeats believes that political destruction can be positive? Does this suggest that he devalues the many lives that must be lost during such a period of violence? Likewise, what does it mean to explore the theory that a poem about rape is also a poem about colonialism? Is this a gross simplification that is perhaps offensive and reductive to both rape victims and members of a colonized nation?

Finally, I wonder if any man can truly express the experience of a woman's aging. This question pushes me further to wonder if we must read Yeats in his own context, or if his writing can be used to address the experiences of people today. By this I mean that for Yeats, what it means to be a woman—and what it means to be an old woman—are very different from what each of those identities mean now. Yeats's women defy stereotypes of their time: Maud Gonne was a revolutionary and had a child with an older lover to whom she was not married. Constance Markievicz, referenced in "Easter, 1916," was a leader of the Easter Rising and was imprisoned for it. Lady Gregory was similarly independent, and with her writing and patronage of other writers and artists, heralded an Irish cultural revival. However, Yeats's female comrades were assigned female at birth, white, and wealthy. Can his writing about women speak to the

experiences of women now—women who are trans? Women who are black or brown? Women who are working class?<sup>64</sup> Is it possible to really take any work of literature out of its context? While it is necessary to acknowledge how different Yeats's world is from the world now in general, and specifically from my own, I believe that it is possible. Yeats's poems have a certain transcendent quality that can speak to people many years later, and to people whom Yeats did not consider when writing them. His work may then be read out of its context. For, to take a work out of its context is, in effect, to appreciate it and connect with it many years after it was written, which I certainly do.

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<sup>64</sup> By calling attention to race, class, and gender, my intention is not to other these people, but to acknowledge that Yeats's poems are a product of their time and often fail to address the various experiences of womanhood.

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